
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE
TRAITOR'S
WIFE

A novel by

KATHLEEN KENT

CARRIER FAMILY REUNION

by Kathleen Kent

In the autumn of 2010, nearly two hundred fifty descendants of Martha and Thomas Carrier gathered in Salem, Massachusetts, to commemorate the courage and steadfastness of these two remarkable people. The date also coincided with the launch of *The Traitor's Wife*, a prequel of sorts to my first novel, *The Heretic's Daughter*. In my first book I told the story of my great-grandmother nine generations back, Martha Carrier, who was hanged during the Salem witch trials in 1692. In my second book, I explored the story of Thomas, a man who, according to local history and family legend, lived to 109 years old, stood seven feet tall, and was one of the executioners of Charles I of England.

The idea for this unusual reunion was born within a few months of the publication of *The Heretic's Daughter*, when I began receiving e-mails and letters from readers across the United States, and even from Canada and England, who also happened to be Carrier descendants. Many of them had heard the same stories that I had listened to as a child, and that I had incorporated into the novel. In planning the book launch for *The Traitor's Wife*, I

thought it would be a great opportunity to bring together some of these Carrier descendants so that they could share their own personal, treasured history, and create new memories to pass on to future generations. Six months before publication, I sent out e-mail invitations to those people who had contacted me, expecting to have a small group appear in Salem for a casual reception and author's talk.

I was calling the event a Carrier Family Reunion, even though most of the people I invited had never met one another, and I knew them only through written correspondence. But by mid-summer, word of the gathering had spread to other members of the extended family, and I had over a hundred confirmed reservations. By October I had over two hundred people scheduled to attend, and the number of interested parties continued to grow weekly.

While many of the Carrier descendants were coming from the New England area, others were flying from as far away as Washington State, Oregon, California, and Arizona. They were making the trip with their parents, spouses, children, and in-laws. One relative from Connecticut came with thirty-five members of his immediate family. Another woman came from South Carolina with eight of her cousins. Some families would be arriving with young children. Others would be traveling with older relatives using walkers and wheelchairs.

I was astonished at the enthusiasm and, in some cases, the sacrifices people were willing to make to be a part of the event. The Carrier reunion had become something more profound and energized than a random encounter between strangers interested in early-American history. It had become a deeply anticipated gath-

ering of family members who had never met before, but who shared important history, and blood.

With the crucial help and support of my publisher, agent, and the Salem Heritage historians, we put together two days of events for the attendees, including a presentation by the prominent Salem historian Alison D’Amario and talks by authors Brunonia Barry (*The Lace Reader*), Katherine Howe (*The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane*), and Elyssa East (*Dogtown: Death and Enchantment in a New England Ghost Town*).

For the opening reception, I had designed a large family tree, with the names of Thomas and Martha’s five children—Richard, Andrew, Tom, Sarah, and Hannah—printed prominently on each “branch.” As the Carrier family members arrived for the reception, they all signed their names on the tree, even some of the younger children, who had to be lifted by parents or grandparents to reach the poster. Many of the attendees greeted me by saying, “Hello, cousin.”

During the reception more than a few connections, lost over time and distance, were rekindled. Numbers and addresses were exchanged, old photographs taken from family Bibles or personal photo albums were gently passed around, and there was a great deal of laughter, and more than a few tears shed. Many of the attendees lingered together long after the reception had officially ended.

I was privileged the next day to give a talk to the several hundred descendants seated together about my own discovery of the Carrier history, and of the research that took me to New England, England, and Wales. Standing in front of this group, now no longer strangers, I felt a powerful link to our shared past, to

these two courageous individuals whose family survived unimaginable hardships. For me, it was a profound experience of connection and pride.

Later that day we gathered at the Salem Witch Trials Memorial to have our own informal ceremony for Martha Carrier. It had only been a few weeks since Halloween, and the trees growing in the surrounding graveyard were still filled with fall color. We offered a moment of silence, and I took the opportunity to look across the many faces of the people collected together to honor Thomas and Martha, and I marveled at the journey that had brought us to this shared space. We filled the open plaza from end to end, standing together as family.

One of the Carriers put it best by saying of the occasion, “I think everybody has this thread inside of them that makes them who they are. Some people have a rope, and some have a cable. And I think there is a cable running through many of the people I’ve met here.”

KATHLEEN KENT: THE WRITER AT WORK

Researching the book

For many people the discovery of their ancestry begins later in life; following school, career-building, perhaps marriage and family. It's often only when we have the extra time and resources to look backward that we pursue our lineage through genealogy or, if we're lucky, through family stories. I was extremely fortunate to have been given some of my mother's family history as a young child. I was about eight years old when I was told by my maternal grandmother that my great-grandmother back nine generations was one of the nineteen men and women hanged as a witch in Salem in 1692. Her name was Martha Carrier and she was called the Queen of Hell by Cotton Mather. My first novel, told from the point of view of her daughter, Sarah, was titled *The Heretic's Daughter*, and it chronicled the growing witchcraft hysteria and the subsequent trials and imprisonment of Martha and four of her five children. Martha was ultimately hanged in August of 1692, going to her death refusing to admit to being a witch, refusing to implicate any of her neighbors, and chastising her judges for listening to a group of girls who were "out of their wits."

Martha's story, however, was only part of the Carrier family lore. Her husband, Thomas Carrier, according to local Massachusetts gossip was thought to be one of the executioners of King Charles I of England. He was long suspected in the colonies of belonging to the group of regicides—confederates of Cromwell—who fled to New England following the restoration of King Charles II to the English throne. According to my grandmother, Thomas lived to 109 and was over seven feet tall. This giant figured prominently in my imagination for most of my childhood, and it was with great enthusiasm, and more than a little awe, that I wrote about this remarkable man in my second novel, *The Traitor's Wife*.

It is a fictional rendering, built in part on true-to-life history of Restoration England and, to a greater extent, on my own imaginings of the experiences of a soldier who survived the English Civil War, sailed to a new world with a price on his head, and married in the colonies at forty-eight years of age. After the death of his wife, Martha, he moved to Connecticut, began building three homes for himself and his children, and started a blacksmith forge—all at seventy years of age. Contrary to custom, and the formidable pressures of Puritan society, he never took another wife.

Most of the research for *The Traitor's Wife* was done the old-fashioned way, with conventional explorations of historical source material of the colonies and Restoration England found in libraries or bookstores. There is a wealth of material that gives the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where* of that period of time, and I spent several years compiling notebooks of information about the spy rings of Charles II and the flight of the regicides to New England.

But to find the *why* of the characters I had been developing, especially for Thomas Carrier, one of the novel's main characters, and my great-grandfather back nine generations, I thought it would be important to travel to Wales. Dylan Thomas writes of the Welsh countryside, "The carved limbs in the rock leap, as to trumpets," and I wanted to see, and feel, for myself the land that had helped to shape his character.

Before leaving for Wales, I didn't have much tangible information about Thomas—only an approximate date of birth, no history about his native family in Wales—and all the documents regarding his livelihood and family status came from Massachusetts and Connecticut; sparse records of a farmer in the New World. But I did have my family's stories, a good many of which painted a portrait of a soldier who had first been a bodyguard to King Charles I, and who later fought for Cromwell during the English Civil War.

Not knowing for certain where he had been born, I traveled to one of the most beautiful towns in Wales—Conwy—not far from Mount Snowdon. The thirteenth-century castle and its battlements had been built to subdue the rebellious Welsh.

It was there, traveling through the nearby villages, experiencing the hard, rocky ground, the changeable weather, and the breathtaking views of Mount Snowdon, that I began to formulate a substantive character. I came to believe that an English king's invading fortress gave him his strength of will, but that the lyrical, savage beauty of the countryside gave him his heart.

*Writing the book, and the importance
of deadlines*

My first novel, *The Heretic's Daughter*, took about five years to research and write. I had no pressing time constraints or deadlines to complete the work, as I didn't have an agent, a publisher, or even the prospects of one. I had no one telling me I had to finish the book by such and such a date, with the possible exception of my family, who kept asking, "Are you ever going to finish that book?"

The process of writing *The Traitor's Wife* was very similar to writing my first novel—except that I now had a commitment to finish the book by a reasonable date for the publisher. Deadlines are a good thing. They keep trains and planes running and help projects get finished on time. But in the back of my mind I had a little voice of doubt whispering that deadlines might inhibit the creative process.

Aside from a few anxious moments during the last few months of revisions before submitting the final manuscript, I'm happy to say that the looming deadline kept me focused, disciplined, and inspired (perhaps it was the extra adrenaline firing up my neuronal pathways).

Before beginning the novel, I spent several months doing background research. In this case, research took me to Wales, and it was there that I began building the plot and development of the main characters. I took copious notes while walking through the countryside or riding on the train—one of my photographs shows a view from the Mount Snowdon railcar and a little stone *hendre*,

or summer house, long abandoned. While writing, I referred to these notes constantly.

It took about two years to complete this second novel, and because of the compressed time, I worked more closely with the editor making draft changes. I am also blessed with an agent with a keen editorial eye, and she is often my First Reader. I try to write for a few hours every day; the operative word here is “try.” Life has a way of throwing into one’s path sick relatives, runaway pets, school projects, and so forth, which, I believe, is actually a good thing. These obstacles keep the mind more flexible, supple, and committed—a bit like a challenging and complicated exercise machine for the brain.

On Being Copyedited

For some writers the copyediting process may be tedious and emotionally draining. A manuscript that has been researched, worked, and reworked for years is something that is filled with emotional connections.

For me, the copyediting process has been a reassuring one. I’ve had the good fortune to work with the same copyeditor twice, and the corrections and questions from her have given me a chance to rethink some of the details; the gaps or disconnects in a character’s actions or reactions; inconsistencies in dates, names, and places; or just plain awkward language and grammar. Fortunately, I haven’t had too many “howlers”—the big mistakes in plot that would mean a major overhaul in the narrative.

During the period of time that the copyeditor has the

manuscript, I try to put the story and characters completely out of my head. I indulge in reading the books that I've really wanted to explore during the weeks and months I've spent researching the book in progress. In fact, the further the reading material is from the tone, time, and place of my own novel, the better.

Before I incorporate any of the copyeditor's changes, I read once through the entire manuscript. Then I go line by line, weighing the suggested changes against my original text. Most often, the suggested copyedits have strengthened the pertinent passages in the particular and, by extension, the work as a whole. I've heard a few writers say that this is the most difficult part of completing a book. For me, it's been one of the least stressful.

What has kept the final editing process from becoming too tedious has been to keep in mind the initial excitement of formulating the plot and the characters. In the case of *The Traitor's Wife*, it was remembering visiting Wales for the first time—the birthplace of my main character, Thomas Carrier.

Promoting the book

A few authors I've talked to dread this part. "Writers write, speakers speak, and never the twain should meet" seems to be the sentiment of some of the more reticent souls who make their living putting words into print.

The first few talks I gave were pretty unnerving. I didn't have a lot of experience speaking in front of groups of people; I was usually the one in the back of the room taking notes. But the best

piece of advice in this regard came from a close friend. She told me, after I had confided to her that I was fearful about speaking in front of a lot of strangers, to relax. “Remember,” she said, “you grew up talking.”

A good piece of advice, that, and one I’ve clung to like a mantra whenever I need to be in public promoting a book. Marketing and public relations, after all, are really about building relationships with people. The idea of building relationships is more appealing, and certainly more fun, than approaching book tours and readings as a necessary, but uncomfortable, part of publishing.

The first large group I spoke to was at a book festival in Vermont a few years ago. A well-known (and Pulitzer Prize-winning) author was to speak right after me. As we were being introduced by the moderator, she leaned over to me and whispered, “Are you nervous?” I nodded, and then she said, “Don’t worry. It gets easier.”

And she was right—it did. In fact, I actually enjoy it now.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What must it be like for Martha, a strong, independent woman, to be a servant in her cousin's home?
2. Why is Martha so determined to gain the upper hand in her early dealings with Thomas and John?
3. Giving birth in the early colonies was often dangerous. What do you imagine it was like for a woman at that time to be pregnant, lacking a proper diet and adequate medical care? Patience often behaves in a weak and ineffectual way. Does knowing about the perils of childbirth that she faced make you feel more compassion for her?
4. Just before Martha's encounter with the wolves, she remembers a poem recited by an elderly great-aunt. The last line is "It is not wolf, but man, and brings a maiden's death" (page 53). What do you think the poem means?

5. Wolves were a real threat in the early colonial wilderness. What do the wolves foreshadow beyond the coming of the assassins?
6. Martha carries a dark secret. At what point do you think Thomas intuits her painful past experiences?
7. When Martha discovers the scroll inside Thomas's trunk, a small piece of wood falls to the floor and "an aversion as strong as anything she had ever felt unfurled its way down her spine" (page 141). Discuss whether you believe some people have the ability to sense past events through physical objects.
8. In chapter 12, Brudloe tells the miller Asa Rogers that it can't be difficult to track down one colonial lout—meaning Thomas. The miller answers, "To find men of stature in this place, in this hard wilderness, one has only to stand on a Boston wharf and look westwards" (page 148). What events do you think helped to make the colonists so capable?
9. Martha's father tells her that he did not raise her to be liked, but rather to be "reckoned with" (page 266). What do you think he means?
10. Often we think of the New World colonies as established on the eve of the American Revolution. History shows, however, that independent thought and action took root much earlier. Discuss ways in which the early spy rings of the colonial settlers aided the colonists' growing independence.